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ABSTRACT

Past research reporting a relationship between parent-child communication about sex and similarity in sexual attitudes between late adolescents and their parents studied late adolescents who were still residing with their parents. The present study attempted to determine whether this relationship was present in college students who were living away from home. Ohio State University main and regional campus students (N=355) and their parents completed questionnaires which measured sexual attitudes, sexual knowledge, sexual behavior, and amount of family communication about sex. Regardless of whether they lived at home or not, and regardless of which campus they attended, the students in this study exhibited the same pattern of attitude similarity that had been found in the past. Students in high communication families had attitudes which were more similar to those of their parents than did the students in the low communication group, regardless of proximity to parents or campus attended. While this study supports the view that parent-child communication about sex is related to adolescents' sexual values, it does not lend much support to the idea that family decisions about sexuality result in less adolescent sexual activity or in a greater use of effective contraception. (Author/NB)

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Parent-child Sexual Attitude Similarity as a Function of
Communication about Sex and Proximity

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Abstract

In an attempt to determine whether the previously found relationship between parent-child communication about sex and similarity in sexual attitudes between late adolescents and their parents is present in college students who are living away from home, 355 main and regional campus students and their parents completed questionnaires which measured sexual attitudes, sexual knowledge, sexual behavior, and amount of family communication about sex. Students in high communication families had attitudes which were more similar to those of their parents than did the students in the low communication group, regardless of proximity to parents or campus attended. While this study supported the view that parent-child communication about sex is related to adolescents' sexual values, it did not lend much support to the idea that family discussions sexuality result in less sexual activity or greater use of effective contraception.

Parent-child Sexual Attitude Similarity as a Function of
Communication about Sex and Proximity

Until recently, few researchers questioned the standard assertion that when parents are the main source of sex education, children tend to engage in less premarital sexual activity and are more likely to use birth control. There are certainly studies which lend empirical support to this conjecture (Fox & Inazu, 1980; Furstenberg, 1971; Lewis, 1973; Spanier, 1977). While other researchers have reported a less direct relationship between a home based sex education and contraceptive use (Reiss, Banwart, & Foreman, 1975; Thompson & Spanier, 1978), it has only been in the last five years that there has been serious questioning of the extent of family influence on adolescent sexuality. Darling and Hicks (1982), Herceg-Baron and Furstenberg (1982), and Newcomer and Udry (1985) have all recently failed to find much evidence for family influence on adolescent sexuality.

If there is a difference in the approach to premarital sexual behavior between adolescents who have talked to their parents about sex as opposed to those who have not, it does not seem to be the result of greater knowledge about sexuality in general or contraception in particular (Bennett & Dickinson, 1980; Casselman & Durham, 1979; Fisher, 1986c; Hansson, Jones, & Chernovetz, 1979; Warren & St. Pierre, 1973), although it could be related to sexual attitudes. Fisher (1986a) reported that although the correlations between childrens' and parents' sexual attitudes were high for all 12 to 14 year old subjects and low for all 15 to 17 year old subjects, there was a relationship between level of family sexual communication and similarity of parents' and childrens' sexual attitudes among 18 to 20 year old subjects. Late adolescents from high communication families had sexual attitudes that were significantly more correlated with those of their parents than did subjects in this age group from low communication families. Apparently the

students most likely to incorporate their parents' sexual values were the ones in families where a discussion of those values has actually taken place. This finding was replicated in a subsequent study (Fisher, 1986b).

It is possible, however, that the findings of both of these studies were due at least in part to the fact that most of these late adolescents were still residing with their parents. Therefore, in order to further elucidate the relationship between parent-child communication about sex and sexual knowledge, behavior, and attitudes, the present study examined these variables in students still living with their parents as well as in students living away from home.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were never married Ohio State University regional and main campus students between the ages of 18 and 24, and their parents. In order to compare students living away from home with those still residing with their parents, subjects were sought from specific geographic areas. The Ohio State University has four regional commuter campuses which are primarily attended by students who are still living with their families. Many of the students from the areas served by these regional campuses choose to take all four years of coursework on the main campus in Columbus. These two groups would serve as ideal comparisons for one another except for the possibility that exposure to the urban influences in Columbus might affect the students attending main campus, and this effect would be confounded with the greater distance from home and family that these students experience compared to regional campus students. Therefore, two other groups were also targeted in this study: students who were living at home with their parents in Columbus and students with parents in the Columbus area who were not living at home. Only one

student from each family was chosen to participate in the study, but both parents were asked to participate.

Out of 2,000 students contacted randomly, 542 (27% of the sample) returned their questionnaires in a usable form. At least one parent of these students returned their questionnaires in 335 cases. It is recognized that the response rate is low, but the purpose of this study was not to describe the population but rather to examine the relationship between communication about sex and sexual behavior and attitudes. There is no reason to believe that the relationships found with this sample would be qualitatively different than those that might have been found in those families who chose not to participate, although they might be quantitatively different.

Two hundred eighty-seven of the students attended the main campus and of these, 36% lived at home with their parents. Two hundred fifty students attended a regional campus and 85% of them lived with their parents. Five students did not designate the campus they attended. There were 224 males and 318 females, with an average age of 20.3 years. The great majority of the students were Caucasian and reported a Protestant or Catholic religious affiliation.

Materials

The Sexual Attitude Scale (Hudson, Murphy, & Nurius, 1983) was used as the attitude measurement instrument for both parents and students. Family communication about sex was measured by asking subjects to report on a scale of zero to four the extent to which nine specific sexual topics (pregnancy, fertilization, intercourse, menstruation, venereal disease, birth control, abortion, prostitution, and homosexuality) had been discussed between the child and each parent. In order to measure sexual and contraceptive knowledge, the Miller-Fisk Sexual Knowledge test was given to the students (Gough, 1974). Several questions about sexual behavior and contraceptive use

were also asked. Each questionnaire had a code number so that the responses of parents and students could be paired after they were returned.

Procedure

A mailing list was generated by randomly sampling those students who met the qualifications for the study, with the stipulation that there be equal numbers of males and females and equal numbers of regional campus and main campus students. Questionnaires and pre-addressed, postage-paid envelopes were mailed individually to 2,000 students and their parents.

Results

The parent with the highest communication score in each family was designated the primary sex educator. Separate medians were calculated for males and for females, and a median split resulted in 181 low and 174 high communication families. All analyses were done using both the parents' and students' reports of communication about sex as an index of communication level, but unless the results were dissimilar, only results using the students' reports will be presented.

Overall, the correlation between the sexual attitudes of low communication parents and their late adolescent children was $r(176) = .36$, $p < .01$. The correlation for the high communication families was $r(169) = .53$, $p < .01$. This pattern is repeated a number of times in Table 1, in which the data are grouped by communication level and proximity to parents as well as campus attended.

In order to facilitate other analyses, an attitude difference score was obtained for each student based on the absolute value of the difference between his/her attitude score on the Sexual Attitude Scale and the attitude score of his/her primary sex educator. This difference score was used as the dependent variable in order to determine the relationship of different

variables to the similarity of the attitudes of parents and their children. The difference score was significantly lower for high communication families ($M = 13.78$) than for low communication families ($M = 17.13$), $t(353) = 2.77$, $p < .01$. When an analysis of variance was done with the three independent variables of communication level (high vs. low), campus attended (main vs. regional), and proximity to parents (living at home vs. living away), only the campus variable was significant, $F(1, 346) = 8.81$, $p < .01$. Main campus students had a larger difference score ($M = 17.60$) than regional campus students ($M = 13.63$), but there were no significant main effects for communication level, $F(1, 346) = 1.97$, $p > .05$, or proximity to parents, $F(1, 346) = .94$, $p > .05$, and there were no significant interactions. A multiple regression using the variables of campus attended, proximity to parents, age of the student, and communication score of the family to predict the difference in sexual attitudes between students and parents yielded a multiple R of .26 ($N = 352$). The significant predictors were campus (unstandardized coefficient = -4.06 ; standardized coefficient = $-.18$, $p < .01$), and family communication score (unstandardized coefficient = $-.22$; standardized coefficient = $-.17$, $p < .01$).

Correlation coefficients run between the sexual communication scores reported by students yielded only one significant relationship: the correlation between sexual communication and sexual knowledge was $r(351) = .13$, $p < .05$. There was also a significant relationship between the parents' reports of communication and sexual inexperience in the students, $r(347) = -.12$, $p < .05$. The correlation coefficients are reported in Table 2.

Discussion

Regardless of whether they lived at home or not, and regardless of which campus they attended, the students in this study exhibited the same pattern of

attitude similarity that has been found in the past. The adolescents in the high communication families had attitudes that more closely resembled those of their parents than did the adolescents in the low communication families, although both groups had attitudes that were significantly similar to those of their parents.

The measure of the difference between students' and parents' attitudes about sex indicated in several additional ways that students who have talked to their parents about sex were more likely to have attitudes similar to those of their parents, although when the variables of campus attended and proximity to parents were included with family communication about sex in a three-way analysis of variance, the communication factor was no longer significant. This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that with the correlational and multiple regression analyses, the entire range of the communication score (from 0 to 36) was utilized. For the analysis of variance, communication was a dichotomous variable. Although a median split provides a convenient method of dividing the group into low communication and high communication families, it is an artificial classification and analyses using this measure provide much less information about actual communication than do analyses using the raw communication score itself. It therefore seems warranted to conclude that the relationship between family discussion of sex and similarity in sexual attitudes is generalizable beyond regional campus college students who are still living at home.

Very little support was provided by this study for the notion that adolescents from high communication families are less likely to have premarital sex or are more likely to use birth control if they are sexually active. Based on the present findings, the most likely area in which family communication about sex might influence the late adolescent is in the

similarity of his/her sexual attitudes to those of his/her parents. While it is necessary to repeat the admonition that in a correlational study such as this one can not draw conclusions as to causality, a recent report by Chewning et al. (1986) supports the notion that communication about sex is likely influencing the sexual attitudes rather than the other way around. These researchers demonstrated that patterns of communication are established before differences in sexual behavior as a function of family communication about sex appear. If this is the case, then one can conclude that adolescents are much more likely to incorporate the sexual values of their parents into their own value system if there has been at least a moderate amount of dialogue between parent and child about aspects of sexuality. It seems apparent that the only way to ensure that one's child will be exposed to and likely adapt one's sexual values is to talk to the child about aspects of human sexuality.

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Table 1

Correlation Coefficients for the Relationship between
Parents' and Students' Sexual Attitudes Classified by
Communication Level and Proximity to Parents

	Communication Level	
	Low	High
Students Living at Home	.38** (105)	.52** (105)
Students Living Away	.27* (73)	.51** (66)
Regional Campus Students	.41** (93)	.59** (90)
Main Campus Students	.27* (85)	.44** (82)

Note. The number of subjects in each group appears in parentheses.

*
p < .05
**
p < .01

Table 2

Correlation Coefficients for the Relationship Between Family
Sexual Communication and Measures of Sexual Behavior

	Parents' Reports	Students' Reports	
	<u>r</u>	<u>r</u>	<u>n</u>
1	*		
Sexual Intercourse	-.12	-.03	348
2			
Sexual Attitudes	-.03	-.01	353
3		*	
Sexual Knowledge	.06	.13	353
Age at First Coitus	.02	.01	213
Number of Partners	-.06	-.09	212
Effective Contraception at First Coitus	.11	.04	213
Effective Contraception Used Currently	.01	.05	161
Percent of Time Contraception is Used	.12	.13	164

Note. The contraceptive use data was converted to a categorical effectiveness measure such that the higher value indicates use of an effective method.

*
 $p < .05$

¹
This variable was coded such that the higher value indicates no sexual intercourse.

²
Higher scores reflect greater permissiveness.